

An Introduction to Community Colleges and Their Students

Community colleges serve about 10 million students per year, or roughly 44% of all undergraduates, depending on the definition used.^{1,2} The nation's 1,000 community colleges are found in rural, suburban, and urban areas and are much more affordable than four-year colleges, providing access to higher education for nearly all Americans.

Community colleges play an essential role in higher education. They provide instruction in a wide variety of fields that lead to employment in sectors such as health care, public safety, information technology, business, and manufacturing. Community colleges prepare students for transfer to four-year colleges and universities, and allow high school students to earn college credits through dual enrollment. They teach adults who are preparing for GEDs or learning English. And community colleges partner with local employers to train or upskill workers needed for regionally important industries and occupations.

Data Definitions

Public two-year colleges: Federal data sources define public two-year colleges as colleges that offer associate degrees but not bachelor's degrees. About 900 of these colleges enroll about 8 million students, 40% of undergraduates.

Community colleges: States have a wider definition of community colleges that includes public two-year colleges and another 100 or so colleges that primarily offer associate degrees but also offer some bachelor's degrees. Together these 1,000 colleges enroll about 10 million students, 44% or undergraduates.

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

Community colleges are an entry point to higher education for many first-generation, low-income, Black, and Hispanic students, and they provide a second chance for older students and workers who need to retrain.

- In the 2018-19 academic year, enrollment at public two-year colleges was 6% Asian, 13% Black, 24% Latino, and 46% White.³
- Community colleges serve a large number of students who are historically underrepresented in higher education. In 2018, 41% of students enrolled in public two-year colleges were Black or Hispanic, compared to 30% of students enrolled in four-year colleges and universities.⁴
- Nearly half of public two-year college students are 24 or older, and 28% have children or other dependents.⁵ About two thirds attend part-time.⁶
- Nearly 60% of public two-year college students are financially independent. About 37% of students, dependent and independent, make less than \$20,000 a year.⁷
- More than 1.4 million high school students enroll in dual enrollment courses each year, with about two thirds participating through community colleges.^{8,9}

Community colleges are relatively affordable and accommodate large numbers of working students.

- In 2020-21, the average published tuition and fees for a full-time student at a public two-year college was \$3,770, compared with \$10,560 at a public four-year college.¹⁰
- About 81% of part-time and 47% of full-time students at public two-year colleges work while enrolled.¹¹
- Community colleges offer three main types of credentials: associate degrees that prepare students for transfer to a bachelor's degree program; applied associate degrees that prepare students for direct entry in a skilled occupation; and certificates (requiring less than two years and sometimes less than one year of full-time study) that focus on specific skills in a career/technical field to prepare students for immediate employment.
- A growing number of community colleges also offer bachelor's degrees in high-demand, workforce-oriented fields.¹²

Community college degrees boost the earning power of graduates, and the colleges contribute to local and national economies.

- Associate degree holders age 25 and older have lower unemployment rates and higher median weekly earnings than persons with a high school diploma or some college but no degree.¹³ This was true even during the worst months of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴
- Some community colleges play a major role in helping students from low-income backgrounds move into middle- and upper-income levels, making them potential engines of upward mobility.¹⁵
- Beyond increasing wages, community college degrees contribute to economic activity, bolster government tax revenues, and reduce the demand for public services.^{16 17}

Community college students have lower graduation rates than students who start at four-year colleges, and there are equity gaps in success rates within community colleges.

- About 40% of community college students earned a credential from a two- or four-year institution within six years. The rate for public four-year college students is 67%.¹⁸
- About 14% of first-time community college students who started in 2013 earned a bachelor's degree within six years (31% transferred to four-year colleges, and 46% of them completed a bachelor's degree).¹⁹
- There are substantial gaps by race and ethnicity in access to dual enrollment; in the pursuit of STEM credentials; in rates of remediation, dropout rates, graduation rates; and more.^{20 21 22 23 24}
- Several factors contribute to lower community college completion rates, including the fact that many students attend part-time. Institutional factors also contribute to poor outcomes, including the "cafeteria college" model on many campuses. Cafeteria colleges give students many options but provide little structure or support to students.²⁵
- Changes to college structures and practices have been shown to improve completion rates. The ASAP program, started at the City University of New York, combines full-time attendance, intensive advising, and financial and other supports and nearly doubles graduation rates.²⁶ Guided pathways reforms, which restructure the college to focus on getting students on a path in a well-designed program of study, are also starting to show impacts on student success.²⁷

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Endnotes

- ¹ The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) excludes community colleges that offer any bachelor's degrees from its definition of public two-year colleges; using this definition, community colleges enroll about 8 million students annually. See NCES (n.d.-a). *Trend generator: Number of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions annually, by sector of institution and student level: 2018-19*. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/TrendGenerator/app/build-table/2/2?rid=1&cid=9>
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- ³ NCES. (n.d.-b). *Trend generator: Number of students enrolled in postsecondary institutions annually, by sector of institution and race/ethnicity: 2018-19*. <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/TrendGenerator/app/build-table/2/2?rid=1&cid=65>
- ⁴ NCES. (2019a). *Digest of education statistics*, Table 306.20. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_306.20.asp?current=yes
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